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TAGS: PREL PARM PGOV PINS MARR MCAP KS KN CH JA

SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF ALLIANCE RELATIONS (1 OF 3)

Classified By: CDA BILL STANTON. REASONS 1.4 (b/d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY OF CABLE SERIES: This report, the first in a series of three on the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) Alliance, examines South Korean perceptions of their security environment. The second looks at what role the ROK sees for the Alliance in its security. The final report addresses how the issues related to the ROK's alliance with the United States are likely to play out during the 2007 South Korean presidential election campaign and beyond. Post explored these topics through discussions with more than a dozen Korean political and national security experts. Those interviewed represented views across the domestic political spectrum, but voiced consensus opinions on the following key points:

-- The Republic of Korea still views North Korea as its number one security concern, but for a variety of reasons that go far beyond military threats.

-- The ROK is highly conflicted in its view of other security threats. It is therefore hedging its bets in relations with its other neighbors in the region.

-- South Koreans strongly desire a continued military alliance with the United States, but continually question whether U.S. interests are truly aligned with their own. They are also sensitive, even touchy, about perceived slights to their national pride.

-- Still, Koreans now largely approve of U.S. management of the Alliance, USG efforts in the Six-Party Talks, and the Korean-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

-- Given the improving state of U.S.-ROK relations, the Alliance is unlikely to become major campaign issue in the 2007 ROK presidential election. END SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

¶2. (C) During the 2002 South Korean presidential election, the victorious candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, exploited as election issues the continuing presence of 37,000 U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) personnel in the ROK, and the associated problems that arose from that presence -- most notably the Highway 56 accident in which two Korean school girls were accidentally run over by a USFK military vehicle. As a result, Post has worked closely with USFK to make it less likely that Alliance issues will again be used to score negative political points in the 2007 presidential campaign. Most important, the USG reached a comprehensive agreement with the ROK on February 22 that resolved several previously contentious Alliance issues, including the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) to the ROKG, and the consolidation and relocation of U.S. bases. That agreement, endorsed by Defense Secretary Gates and ROK Defense Minister General (ret.) Kim Jang-soo, greatly helped to depoliticize Alliance issues in the lead up to the December 2007 South Korean presidential election, thereby making it less likely that "We" will be the issue in

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"Their" campaign.

¶3. (C) The U.S. military presence in Korea nonetheless remains a tempting target for criticism from leftist politicians, student groups and activist NGOs who oppose the environmental and social costs of hosting U.S. Forces on Korean soil. Even conservative groups traditionally aligned with the USG, have had no compunction about scoring political points by opposing certain aspects of our U.S. Military transformation strategy, most notably through their vocal opposition to the OPCON transition. While we expect that U.S.-ROK Alliance issues will receive less negative attention in this year's South Korean presidential race, issues involving the remaining 29,000 USFK forces stationed on Peninsula are still likely to generate attacks from politicians and their supporters seeking to score political points at the expense of the Alliance.

¶4. (C) To develop a better understanding of South Korean perspectives on security, Alliance transformation, and how those issues are likely to play out politically during and after the election campaign, Post's POL-MIL unit interviewed a wide variety of national security experts in Korea (listed in final paragraph of the series). Throughout these reports, special attention has been paid to highlighting the political, rather than military aspects of Alliance relations, since the former is more likely to influence political debate in this country, and the latter is ably reported on by other members of our country team. In short, our goal was to develop a better understanding of the POL in our POL-MIL relationship with South Korea. We hope these reports will help U.S. foreign policy makers anticipate and respond appropriately to efforts by those -- whether on the left or the right -- who seek to adversely politicize Alliance relations.

REPORT 1: SOUTH KOREAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

North Korea Remains No. 1 Concern

15. (C) There is broad consensus among South Korean security experts that the ROK should be most concerned about three countries: The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, and Japan. Despite seven years of North-South engagement policy, there was universal agreement that North Korea continues to pose the greatest challenge to maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. There are, however, differing opinions as to why that is the case. The majority remain concerned about the DPRK's one million strong Korean Peoples Army (KPA), its ability to rain mortar shells upon the city of Seoul, and its newly demonstrated nuclear capability. None believe the North will launch a premeditated attack upon the South, but many worry that a belligerent, perhaps even accidental, clash of forces might someday spark a crisis that could escalate to war. A small, but significant number of South Koreans fear that the United States might precipitate war by launching a preemptive strike against North Korean nuclear facilities.

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16. (C) The scenario that most worries Korean security experts, however, is a possible (some say inevitable) breakdown of internal control within North Korea's authoritarian military regime, prompted perhaps by the death of DPRK leader Kim Jong-il. The possibility of a precipitous decline in the North Korean economy was also often cited as a significant concern. According to Dr. Yoon Young-kwan, a former ROK Foreign Minister and now a professor at Seoul University, South Korea's provision of large amounts of aid to the North is primarily aimed at preventing that kind of "hard landing." For that reason, many Koreans view such aid as an important part of the ROK's national security budget, Yoon explained. Whatever might prompt a crisis with the North, the possibility that any one of the above scenarios could in fact occur has kept the DPRK atop the list of South Korean security concerns.

Concerned About China or Japan? Depends On Whom You Ask

17. (C) The North Korea problem aside, there were starkly differing opinions among security experts as to the proper prioritization of South Korea's remaining security concerns. Second place on the list was either China or Japan, depending on the person consulted. Some expressed serious concerns about Japanese intentions, while others voice little or no concerns at all. Others pointed instead to the People's Republic of China as the greatest threat to Korean autonomy, or more often as a long term challenge to the South Korean economy.

Japan

18. (C) Dr. Moon Chung-in, former chair of Roh Moo-hyun's Presidential Committee on East Asia Regional Issues, agreed that North Korea remains Seoul's number one concern, especially in light of the asymmetric threat posed by DPRK nuclear weapons. He added, however, that the ROK military strongly desires to better equip itself to deal with "other contingencies." Most of the experts consulted pointed out that aside from controversial historical issues, overall relations between Japan and the ROK had improved dramatically over the past decade. Acknowledging that most Koreans did not view Japan as a security threat today, Dr. Moon nonetheless pointed out that many Koreans did worry that Japan could once again become a threat because of a "follow-the-herd mentality" that he said made the Japanese capable "under certain conditions" of changing their intentions toward Korea dramatically. While this is an amorphous basis upon which to construct the ROK's national security strategy, we can confirm such views are widely held among the Korean people. South Koreans therefore tend to view everything the Japanese government does -- from acquisition of Aegis class destroyers to Prime Minister Abe's

comments about the comfort women issue -- through that prism.

¶9. (C) Concerns about Japan are by no means universal in the ROK. Dr. Andrei Lankov, a historian at Kookmin University, believes the "Japanese threat" has been wildly over-inflated

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for domestic political reasons. Many Koreans understand this, but widespread "Japan bashing" by Korean politicians has created a problem because it has distorted the average citizen's view of reality. Informed Korean elites, like former ROK Foreign Minister Han Seung-joo, have very little concern about Japanese military power. Ambassador Han pointed out that as long as the U.S.-Japan Alliance remained strong, Japan would be in no position to pose a genuine threat to the ROK. Dr. Kim Byung-kook, Director of the East Asia Institute at Korea University agreed, pointing out that despite occasional "political chest-thumping" on anti-Japanese themes, ever increasing personal, economic, educational and cultural exchanges between Japan and the ROK will far outweigh the political rhetoric. Others, like former Foreign Minister Yoon went further in his comments, arguing that South Korea should do more to build its relationship with Japan because Japanese political, and especially economic, support would be necessary to stabilize the Korean Peninsula following the collapse of North Korea.

China

¶10. (C) A number of the security experts we interviewed, such as Hyun In-taek, Director of the Ilmin International Relations Institute, and a foreign policy advisor to the leading GNP presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak, noted the disconcerting build-up of China's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) as a more realistic long-term threat to Korean autonomy. Most, however, like Ambassador Han Seoung-joo, voiced what appears to be a more commonly held view in Korea today. He said the PRC currently poses no threat to the ROK, is in fact well thought of, and affords many economic opportunities for Korean companies in the short to mid-term. At the same time, he said, many Koreans believe China does pose a significant challenge to the South Korean economy, and perhaps even to its autonomy, in the longer term. Others who held this view pointed out that historically it was China, not Japan, that posed the greatest threat to Korea. They were concerned that Beijing's position on a unified Korean Peninsula was uncertain, while its lack of political and military transparency made it an unpredictable force in the region. Park Se-il, President of the Hansun Foundation for Freedom and Prosperity, warned that while Beijing has consistently called for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it in fact has been more interested in maintaining its special relationship with Pyongyang than in exercising its influence to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

¶11. (C) For now, however, economic rather than military factors dominate ROK thinking with regard to China. While it was not readily understood outside of Korea, our interlocutors claimed the ROK's engagement strategy toward North Korea was directed more at concerns about future economic competition with China, than it was about altering North Korean behavior. People ascribing to that view saw the North as an inexpensive labor pool and source of needed raw materials the South hopes to harness for its own economic progress, while denying those same economic assets to its PRC competitors. For them, the ROK's "Peace and Prosperity

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Policy" is a useful economic hedge against a rising China.

¶12. (C) Final important threads in Korean thinking about China includes their concern about a possible decline in the

U.S.-China relationship. Dr. Kim Byung-kook said that any deterioration in Washington's relations with Beijing would be "disastrous" for the ROK. That concern was evident when the Ambassador informed the ROK Foreign Ministry in January that the PRC had successfully destroyed one of its old satellites with an ASAT missile. Upon hearing that information, the only question the Foreign Minister asked in response was: How will it affect relations between the United States and China? Others in the ROK speculate the United States might make a deal with China, and/or North Korea, at the expense of relations with the South. Still others suggest the ROK might one day sacrifice its Alliance with the United States for closer relations with China.

Maneuvering to Meet All Challenges

¶13. (C) What is the Republic of Korea doing on its own to meet its perceived threats? Not much, according to Soongsil University political science professor Kang Won-taek. Kang accused the ROK leadership of lacking a vision of the future.

Recently, the South Korean government has been seeking "a more balanced relationship" with the United States, but to what end? Kang asked. Others consider such a charge to be unfair, given the tremendous uncertainty the South Korean government faces over what will happen to North Korea, and the divergent views of Koreans toward China and Japan.

¶14. (C) There does, however, appear to be a consensus among Korean security experts that the ROKG is, and should be, preparing to meet all possible challenges. They tend to describe the ROK's strategic vision as incorporating three main elements: 1) Peaceful coexistence with its neighbors; 2) Retaining a strong alliance with the United States as the backbone of its national security policy, and; 3) Expansion of relations with other countries outside the region, such as India and the countries of the Middle East (the latter in order to meet its energy security needs). In addition, the ROK is also modernizing its own military forces under its Defense Reform 2020 (DR 2020) plan. DR 2020 places primary emphasis on increasing South Korea's air and naval capabilities, paid for in part by significant reductions in the size of the ROK Army.

¶15. (C) Overall, DR 2020 is seen as a prudent effort on the part of the South Korean government to provide needed enhancements to South Korea's overall security capabilities. Analysis of ROK military acquisition plans reveals much about South Korean intentions. Most notable is that the ROK Navy is embarking on an aggressive effort to establish a new naval base on Cheju Island, and to create a "blue water" navy comprised of three or more "expeditionary groups." The result will be a far more mobile fleet that includes Aegis-class KDX III destroyers and type 214 diesel submarines. The proposed naval base, which will most likely be built at Wimiri Harbor, is an ideal location from which to sail east to Japan, west to China or south to Tawian and the

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vital sea lines of communication that flow through Southeast Asia. Other strong motivations that emerged from our discussions included South Korea's desire to reach parity with the Japan Maritime Self Defense Forces, and its perceived need to enhance its capabilities to defend its claims of sovereignty over the Socotra and Liancourt Rocks, disputed with China and Japan respectively.

¶16. (C) Defense Minister Kim told visiting Director of Central Intelligence Hayden on March 27 that Japan and China are both increasing their military power, but that both blame each other as the reason for having to do so. The ROK is "stuck in the middle," the Defense Minister said, so it must be mindful of what both China and Japan are doing as they militarize. There are indications this tendency on the part of South Korea to hedge its bets in the region applies to other aspects of its diplomatic, as well as national security

policy. For example, the ROK appears to be attempting to align itself with both of the two largest powers in the region, the United States and China. At the same time, however, South Korea is also working to build other relationships within the international community. Its successful campaign to get Ban Ki-moon elected UN Secretary General, and its troop contribution to UNIFIL are examples of this intent. Former Foreign Minister Han Seung-joo said that in order to "survive," South Korea must work to gain a greater global role. He revealed that a key part of the ROKG plan is to increase its ODA contributions substantially.

¶17. (C) In sum, South Korea is attempting to maneuver among the various powers in the region, and expand its role in the world at large. It cannot be certain whom to trust, or where its interests might run afoul of others in the future.

According to Professor Moon, that is the proper interpretation of what President Roh meant when he called for the ROK to become a "balancer" in the region. That is the wrong word to describe it, Moon explained, because the United States is the true balancer in the region. But since the ROK does not entirely trust the intentions of other regional powers, it believes it is necessary to maneuver politically and diplomatically among them, while also standing up militarily to the countries that surround it, Dr. Moon explained. Former ROK Prime Minister Lee Hong-koo noted that throughout history when one of Korea's neighbors became a hegemonic power, the balance was broken in the region and the Korean people suffered as a result. Korea would suffer again if China, Japan, or Russia were to emerge as a regional hegemonic power, Ambassador Lee explained.

¶18. (C) Another Korean analyst aptly described how the South Korean security perspective affects the ROK's Alliance with the United States. He noted that the ROK is like a medium-sized boat that is "maneuvering" to keep from getting blocked in by, or crushed between, other larger vessels operating in the same waters. In that sense, he said, the ROK's Alliance with the United States is akin to that smaller boat following in the wake of an aircraft carrier. The arrangement works to the benefit of the Korean captain so long as he doesn't trail too close or drift too far away, and most important, as long as the aircraft carrier is going in the direction he wants it to go.

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